

Mauritanian Social Structure

Mauritania's socio-cultural situation often strikes outsiders as unusually complex and difficult to understand. It certainly is different from which most westerners are acculturated and provides a refreshing opportunity to cleanse one's mind of numerous ethnocentric stereotypes. This is especially true of four crucial concepts: tribe, ethnic group, class and caste. These four terms are continuously confused and the term "tribe" is often misused.

A **tribe** is a political unit. This unit may claim descent from a common ancestor or not. What is important is they recognize belonging to a unit that is based on some present or past common interest in exerting power: either to obtain or protect themselves, or their resources. Tribes are concrete entities made up of individual members who can gather, appoint leaders, make war, etc. People can be admitted into or thrown out of a tribe. For westerners, a tribe is very similar to a Scottish clan.

An **ethnic group** is a somewhat more abstract entity than a tribe. Its existence is based on the feeling of a shared identity on the part of people who possess a common life style, language, religion, or other major cultural institution. One belongs to an ethnic group because both the individual and others "feel" they belong. A person is neither admitted into nor thrown out of an ethnic group. Often, people of the same ethnic group deny the legitimacy of each other's claimed identity. There is no inherent political basis to ethnic identity, though political units can manipulate ethnic differences for such purposes. Members of the same ethnic group need not be allies and in fact, may have been enemies.

Class is a still more abstract concept than ethnic group. People are members of the same class when someone "classifies" them together as members of a certain class. There is not a prerequisite for ascribing membership. Someone can be classified as a member of the working class based on the job he does even if he believes he is a descendant of the King of England and entitled to be considered as royalty.

Caste is the most specific of these crucial concepts. When applied to West African societies, it is used in the very general meaning of the division of societies into hierarchically-ranked, endogamous-occupational groups. The relationship between these has ritual as well as economic significance.

All of the groups in the western Sudan who were integrated and functioning parts of one or more indigenous empires of the past, share a basic common class structure: Free People (nobles and commoners), Casted People (different craftsmen), Artisans and Entertainers (*griots*), Freed People (former slaves) and Slaves. Likewise, the caste division of these structures is largely the same (weavers, leatherworkers, entertainers, etc...). The similarly of social structure, the migratory nature of the area's population, the fact that marriage rules apply more strictly to first marriages and become progressively looser thereafter, and that except for slave status, the offspring's status follows the father's, permits a much greater social mobility over a generation or two than would otherwise seem likely.

To understand Mauritanian society, one must understand its ethnic groups, its tribes, social-economic classes and its castes. The major ethnic groups and subdivision are as follows:

The *Hassaniya* speakers who predominate over the majority of the country except along the river are divisible into two crucial subgroups – the *Beydane* or white Moors and the *Haratine* or black Moors. The **Beydane** are traditionally further divided into *Z'waya* (religious or *marabout* groups), *M'allmin* (craftsmen) and *Igawen* (entertainers). Besides the traditional occupation by which these subgroups are identified, they generally involve themselves in some other types commercial trading, livestock raising or both.

The **Haratine** are commonly referred to as "freed slaves," in contrast to the term *Abid* that means a captured slave. They are viewed as the descendants of former black slaves that were originally taken from along the river, Mali or Senegal. Some live as an integral part of a larger *Beydane* encampment. Others have their own

encampments and work as herders or are settled in Haratine agricultural communities. Haratines generally categorize themselves in the following groups: Arabs, Africans or distinctly different group. While they are generally held in low esteem in some areas of Mauritania, Haratine are considered higher than Zenaga. This is especially true in eastern areas where some Haratine groups have risen above their normal sharecropper role to acquire considerable herds of animals.

The **Halpulaar** are speakers of the Pulaar language. The largest group is the **Toucouleur**, and make up the agricultural populations that dominate both sides of the Senegal River. Prior to colonial domination, they lived under a highly stratified theocracy. While the traditional division of their society into *Rimbe* (free men), *Nyenybe* (artisans) and *Maccube* (captives) still has meaning in terms of individual social status, it no longer dictates actual occupations or the power relationships between different subgroups and particular individuals.

The **Peul** (Fulbe, Fula or Fulani) are Halpulaar cattle pastoralists whose migration patterns often include Mali and Senegal. In terms of social status, the Peul largely function as a semi-itinerant cattle-owning class, equivalent to status to the Trobe (Halpulaar religious nobles). Some confusion as to their practices and class exist because many of their former slaves (*Rimiibe*) have adopted their lifestyle and present themselves as “authentic Peul.”

The **Soninke** (Sarakolle) are predominant in the Guidimaka region, which borders eastern Senegal and Mali. They still maintain a highly stratified social structure and their organization closely resembles that of the Malian Bambara. This social structure includes slavery. It stresses hard work, close cooperation and extremely tight extended family relations under the authority of a patriarch. From the beginning of their history, the Soninke have been closely associated with male exploitation of migratory economic activities either as traders or laborers. Local power was traditionally allotted and maintained by several powerful lineage groups. Perhaps the greatest reversal they have suffered since independence is to see their region of Mauritania, which was a favored commercial river trade outlet in colonial times, become a backwater to a distant coastal capital.

The **Wolof** is the single largest ethnic group in Senegal. While they too have a traditionally stratified class society, its traditional divisions are largely meaningless today. This is especially true among the expatriate communities found in Mauritania near the border region around Rosso and in the capital, Nouakchott. Because they are the predominant group in Senegal, they can more easily integrate into the Senegalese society. Therefore, their presence in Mauritania generally represents a response to opportunities that already existed and they profitably exploited (i.e. urban skills such as carpentry, masonry, etc.).

Of all these groups, only the Hassaniya-speaking Beydanes and Haratine have tribes. The Toucouleur, Peul, Wolof and Soninke are not tribes nor do they belong to tribes. They are united in extended family groups of different sizes and cohesion while their settlements may be divided into sections referred to as *Halagaiz*, *Halgay* or *Halagai* (circles).

The Toucouleur and Wolof live in settled communities along the river that are not only permanent but are quite ancient in some cases. Such settlements are often characterized by substantial investments in both personal and community physical infrastructure (houses and mosque). Depending on size, they are further divisible into neighborhoods (*quartiers*) and family concessions. The same is true of the Soninke, except that these communities are usually inland and more cohesive than those of the Toucouleur and Wolof. The Peul tend to live in smaller hamlets (*wuro*) usually composed of straw huts that are sometimes surrounded by flimsy fences. If the whole family travels with the herd, these are occupied seasonally. Other times, only specific herders (teenage boys) will leave with the animals and the others stay home. This pattern generally is referred to as transhumance – having fixed home locations but with substantial seasonal movement of at least some members of the household. However, these fixed locations are neither as permanent nor do they function as an interdependent community as do Toucouleur communities.

Of course today the situation is rapidly changing. In the last two decades, the country's population has gone from being two-thirds nomad, one-third sedentary, to exactly the opposite (one-third nomad, two-thirds sedentary). The change has been so recent that Mauritania does not yet have a well-established urban population with severed ties from the rural population. Most urban dwellers from the head of state to the unemployed squatter, are still closely tied to rural values and specific rural communities.

Hassaniya or Moor culture has traditionally been a nomadic society with links to trading, religious centers, and oases areas. Most of the relationships that unite people are therefore more social than residential due to the fluid residential patterns. Geographic identity is very important. It usually occurs on the level of regional identities and is expressed when people find themselves third-party strangers (i.e. in Nouakchott, people often see a unity among those from Trarza, as opposed to others from Tagant or Adrar). This phenomenon is being somewhat both expressed and catered to by the government's decision to denote administrative regions by their traditional names.

The social cement that unites people extends across regions. Basically, a Beydane belongs to one of a large number of tribes or clans (*Qabila*) whose members theoretically descend from a common ancestor. These, however, generally are large and ancient to the point of having little meaning in terms of the management of everyday life. As a result they break down into smaller factions called *Fakhdh* or fractions. In theory, members of the same *Fakhdh* also descend from a common descendant of the original founder of the *Qabila*. In reality, membership in both a *Qabila* and *Fakhdh* can change, which are as much an alliance of people with similar social status as they are actual kin groups. It is usually the *Fakhdh* that is the actual functioning alliance and members of different *Fakhdh* of the same *Qabila* may be actually allied against each other. The *Fakhdh* themselves are composed of patrilineal extended families (father and sons) called *Ahel*. The *Ahel* are the most fundamentally important kin units, especially since divorce is quite frequent in many areas and the nuclear family of husband, wife and children is unstable.

In the rural areas, the basic living unit is the *Khayma* or tent. It is generally synonymous with the nuclear family. The *Frig* is the encampment of which three different categories are generally recognized: (1) small *Frig* from 1-15 tents, generally referred to as a *Khyam*; (2) *Frig* of 10-20 tents called *Nezla*; and (3) very large encampments are called *V'rig Massa*. The *Massa* where the chief has his tent is referred to as *Helle* or *El Qariya* (the tribal center). It can be said that tribal and social barriers tend to merge and Mauritians from all areas can be found in government positions and all tend to interact socially.

While change is occurring in regard to ethnic, tribal and class identity, the old categories are still operative, applicable, and crucial for a proper understanding of the country's present socio-economic situation. A brief description such as this cannot do justice to either the complexity of the subject for the reader who wishes to acquire a profound knowledge of the culture. It is hoped, however, that it will provide what is necessary to understanding the basic milieu.

REV 11/03